

Rhinokopia

by Alan J. Branford

“Where’s your nose?!!”

I felt a spasm in my bowels. *Oh God, please don’t let me soil myself.* The stares of the other boys seared into me. My mouth had dried up and my tongue felt to have swollen. *Speak! For God’s sake, say something.* Some of the boys looked awkwardly away. Some of them subtly stroked their strong aristocratic noses in mockery.

“Where’s your nose, Justinian?!!” The schoolmaster slammed his fist down on his desk. I nervously fingered the waist of my robe. I heard a snigger. I knew it was Jovian. *I bet he fantasises of going without his nose.* As beads of sweat formed into trickles, so I felt my courage and bravado seep away as panic and terror took hold. It had seemed so easy. All Sunday I had lived and relived in my mind my moment of revelation. I would swagger confidently into the school room, noseless and unashamed. A rhinophobe taking his place with the rhinophiles. I would sit nonchalantly at my desk and look round the room with contempt. Surely I could choose to not have a nose? What did it matter if I hadn’t a nose?

And here I was. Lamely, I began muttering excuses. “I removed it for cleaning, and then forgot it in the rush”, I offered pathetically. Then I made the situation even worse. “It fell off and I lost it, you see.” By now the boys were openly laughing, a feral pack feeding on my humiliation, taking pleasure in my ignominy. The schoolmaster was apoplectic!

I gathered the hood of my robe tightly around my head as I sullenly trudged through the courtyard to the Master’s Lodge. There was no-one around - all the boys were in classes - and yet so total was my capitulation that I still sought to hide my shameful face.

The gymnasium had been founded centuries ago by the Basileus Valerian I. He was a native of this province and had entered the imperial service as a soldier in the provincial legion. His outstanding military capabilities had shone in the wars against the northern tribes, and so when the Basileus died without a clear successor, Valerian had been acclaimed Basileus by the

army and a new dynasty had begun. Thus it was that our province had been honoured by an imperial gymnasium.

I passed into the cloisters and the busts of past heroes of the empire seemed to look down on me with scorn. Perversely, I recalled the noble Hadrian who had ruled the empire in earlier days. He had brazenly ruled without a nose: statues of his noseless visage had adorned every city in the empire. But that was another era. Then the emperor had been styled Augustus, the empire had covered the entire civilised world and its capital was a hub of culture and intellect. Now a mere fraction of its former glory, the empire was ruled by a Basileus from a meretricious capital far to the east of the original. Indeed the old capital had been in barbarian hands for generations. I smiled ironically to myself: there was certainly no bust of Hadrian Augustus in these cloisters.

I entered the Master's antechamber and handed to the secretary the parchment the schoolmaster had written. Without a word, he motioned me into a reception room and left to deliver the damning treatise. I sat with sickening apprehension. As any true sadist would know, it's not the falling rock hitting one that is the torture: it is that bolt of terror as one sees the rock about to fall. My scrotum contracted tighter and tighter and I began desperately to want to relieve myself.

The door opened and the Master strode into the room. He was a tall, slender man in his fifties, clean shaven as was the prevailing custom. He had a peculiar gait, caused in part by a lack of coordination in the long limbs and in part by his habit of keeping his nose slightly in the air. I was reminded of a deranged water bird translated from its habitat. His features were angular, not a soft line to be seen: this harsh geometry matched his cheerless demeanour. Flinty eyes stared down an aquiline nose and suggested a cold soul beneath. Viverrus was the youngest son of a well renowned family. One brother was governor of a neighbouring province, another was an imperial ambassador, a nephew was a decorated soldier. But Viverrus had never achieved the position expected of him - or rather as he believed was expected of him. His attitude and behaviour bespoke the turbulent frustration that poisoned his personality. He fed his inadequacy by exploiting the fears of inexperienced youth - and I was about to provide a sumptuous meal!

I was regaled with the legends of the founder Valerian, reminded of the sacrifices of long dead alumni, reproached for my lack of respect for my parents. I was berated for my insult to the gymnasium and belittled for my adolescent impudence. And all through this tirade, the Master declined to make direct eye contact, preferring instead to sneer obliquely.

At last the homily was over and I approached the desk. Ceremoniously, I leant over, pulling my robe over my head. My bare buttocks waved lewdly like I were some whore in the bazaar. The swish of the birch kept an obscene rhythm, and each stroke bit into tender flesh. As the sixth blow landed, the sweet smell of blood mingled with that of the urine that trickled down my leg.

In a stupor I stumbled into the empty dormitory. I was now so overwhelmed that I collapsed on my bed and let misery turn into tortured sleep: there on the wall above, the epithet “Rhinotmetus” had been smeared in excrement.

As time passed, the more direct attacks waned. I grew accustomed to the sobriquet “Rhinotmetus”, which soon had become well established. But boys typically were savaged by psychological abuse: such is the cruelty of adolescence. Indeed, there were even other boys who were suspected of rhinophobia, and were thus subjected to the same taunts and harassment as I. I was merely the only one to have so publicly proclaimed my orientation. However, the humiliation of that day had emptied my soul of its essence. I wandered unfeeling and detached, a desiccated leaf blown along by an arbitrary wind. I rarely interacted with the other boys and my academic performance declined precipitously. Such is the culture of these kinds of institution that the strong are adulated and the weak allowed to perish.

But then one day I was sitting idly in the junior gardens when the *magister* Galerian approached and sat beside me on the bench. Galerian was the professor of philosophy and rhetoric, an anachronism of scholarship in this world of martial posturing. Thus I was surprised when he started talking to me about military studies.

“I see you’re not very good at military studies”, he said. I was taken aback by this barb.

“Not at all, sir”, I replied indignantly. It is true that my grades had fallen, but no more in this area than in any other, and they were still above those of many students. I was puzzled indeed by this comment.

“You’re alone and unarmed”, he hypothesised, “and suddenly an armoured warrior, much larger than you, charges with an axe. You throw yourself bodily into him?”

“Of course not!”, I retorted.

“So what do you do?”, he asked. We had often practised many forms of unarmed combat: turning a defensive action into an offensive strike. I even liked to think that I was rather good at it.

“I side-step and, with skill and finesse, I use the attacker’s own force against him”, I replied.

“And so it is with life”, he philosophised, “and yet you throw yourself bodily against the entire well armed establishment. Bide your time, young man. Establish a position. Use its own force against it.”

And with that the *magister* rose, and as he left he absently turned back to me and handed me a medallion before he strolled away. On the obverse was inscribed “*Cave oppressorem*” (“*Beware the oppressor*”), on the reverse “*Caveat oppressor*” (“*Let the oppressor beware*”). I smiled knowingly and placed the medallion around my neck.

*

The sky was already dark as I laid down my stylus. I massaged my forehead in weariness. It was twenty years, I reflected, since I had come to the capital. I had come as a well educated scion of a provincial worthy and had carved a good career in the imperial service. The reign of Tiberius III could best be summed up as one of benign incompetence. The economy was sound, the borders quiet, and the governance of the empire was left by the Basileus to those more capable if less noble than he. I flourished in this environment, and had enjoyed a steady rise in the ranks, culminating in

appointment as *comes domi*, the Count of the Household, and for all practical purposes the head of government. That was two years ago.

But how quickly a squall can enrage a calm sea! The barbarians of the east, peaceful for generations, could maintain civility no longer and once again the empire was under attack. The noble Tiberius could not allow this insult to the glory of the empire, and so he set off at the head of his legions for the east. Alas, the only general with any confidence in the ability of the Basileus to lead a military campaign was Tiberius himself.

Within two months, Tiberius was dead, the legions in chaos on the eastern marches. The heralds announced the slaying of the heroic emperor on the field of battle, cut down in defence of the empire by barbarian savages. The only legion to escape wholesale slaughter was that from the province of Isaurus. The Isaurian legion had been curiously late for the campaign, and so it was the Isaurian legion that had marched into the capital with the news of the fall of the Basileus - and had installed their own on the vacant throne.

Leontius was by any measure a cruel tyrant - and the empire had had many with which to compare him. It had taken all my energies to curb his worst excesses and hold the empire from complete fracture. The disgraceful treaty executed with the barbarians had ruined the imperial treasury, and the cream of the officer class had been sent east as permanent hostages.

But this last year had been the worst. The stories in the taverns of an Isaurian lance being plucked from the late Basileus and not a barbarian spear had ceased to be heard - the story tellers strangely had vanished. It seems that the only people in steady employment were Leontius's agents. There were now reports of food riots in the provincial cities. And so the Senate, that assembly of emasculated patricians, had finally demanded an account of the state of the empire from the Basileus. Thus it was that tomorrow, the *comes domi* was summoned to address the noble senators. At last I had finished my speech: I had a perverse resignation that it may well be my last.

I was far too restless to retire to my chamber, so I grabbed my cloak and set off down the labyrinthine corridors of the palace complex. Periodically there would be a guard who would nod in respect - and smile to himself in silence. It was not the first time that the hooded *comes domi* had scurried

past them after dark. At last I passed through the pantries and out a delivery door into the streets of the capital.

I gathered the hood of my robe tightly around my head as I quickly traversed the familiar lanes. I always had a peculiar feeling of déjà vu at this time, but perhaps it was just the adrenaline surge from being alone at night on the streets. After about fifteen minutes the grand houses of the wealthy gave way to sad apartment blocks and finally to shambling tenements as I entered the dockside precinct. The danger now was not of recognition but of robbery, and so still I kept to the shadows.

Down an innocuous alley was a heavy oak door in a plain wall. I rapped twice, and a face appeared at the security grille that had opened in response. Nods were exchanged and I was ushered into a vast catacomb. Here there throbbed a rhinophobic subculture, cast adrift by the mainstream, but reconvened underground. There were bankers and merchants and labourers and thieves - a diversity as rich as any community - but all without the least contrition at being noseless, and bound by that common bond.

I sat in the darkened bar and toyed with a drink.

“Greetings, Hadrian!”, saluted a noseless man as he passed by. We never used our real names here, always pseudonyms. Across the bar I spied a senior army officer, sitting noseless, joking with his fellows. I smiled. If only his men could see him now!

The nose queens were out in force that night. Gaudily attired, they flaunted extravagant noses in parody of the societal mores against rhinophobia. By day, they were ordinary members of society; but by night, ... I must admit that I had never really felt comfortable with the nose queens. But solidarity was paramount: we each find our own way of reacting against the entrenched bigotry.

My reverie was broken by a scuffle nearby. A group of drunken young rhinophobes had grown belligerent and started to fight. I recognised some of them: it was not so long ago that they had arrived in the city, innocent cubs thrown into the mêlée of an unjust jungle. I was saddened to see how quickly they had grown hard, spiralling downwards on a course of self destruction.

Some friends arrived and rescued me from my melancholy. Like me, they were professionals with positions of responsibility. And like me, they were forced to tread warily in conventional society - changelings in a suspicious and hostile tribe. It was only here that we could leave off the actor's garb and at last play ourselves. We passed several relaxed hours in intimate conversation, before inevitably it was time for me to return to the palace.

I woke early and refreshed, having been buoyed by the camaraderie of the night before. The babble of noise from the streets was louder than usual, and by the time I crossed the palace square to the Senate House there was a heaving crowd. The guards had difficulty in making a path for my retinue through the mob. At the front of the Senate House the tribunes were bustling between groups of citizens and the Senate chamber with a new found importance.

Inside the chamber, I took up my position in a vestibule for government officers and awaited the commencement of proceedings. From my vantage point I surveyed the chamber as the last of the senators took their places. They sat in semicircular rows raked above the floor, as if spectators at the games in the hippodrome. In the focus of the chamber was the official seat of the President of the Senate; to the side nearer me was a lectern and to the other side was a throne reserved for the Basileus for those occasions on which he attended a sitting of the Senate. Behind the President's chair was an ornate chamber lined with richly decorated friezes. In the centre was a marble altar, used for sacrifices in the old religion, but now merely ornamental. *They make their sacrifices in other ways today, I mused.* Spectacular vaulted ceilings, culminating in a central dome, crowned this cultural and engineering masterpiece.

The Tribunes of the People had now taken their seats in the vestibule directly across the chamber from where I sat. They looked like lascivious mastiffs about to be fed. A single trumpet blast heralded the formal arrival of the President, today accompanied by the Basileus. The President, lame and partially blind, shuffled into the auditorium. His traditional white robes hung limply from his crippled frame - a shroud for the not quite dead. In contrast, the Basileus was wrapped imperiously in purple and walked regally to his throne. Leontius was a stocky man who carried the robes of state well. But beneath these noble vestments, knotty arms betrayed a raw

peasant brutality. Flaccid jowls and capillary streaked nose were testament to years of personal excess. The line of his mouth curled demonically and his eyes had a look of madness.

Following the opening oration of the President, more muttered than spoken, the Praelector announced the *comes domi*, and I rose and approached the lectern. I was prepared - if anything embarrassed - with an abundance of evidence of the criminal conspiracy and neglect of the Basileus and his party: for two hours I detailed the crimes of the regime. The tribunes fed voraciously on the outrages and were constantly running out to the citizenry in the palace square to convey the news. The babble from the streets had now become more like a rumbling of thunder, causing guards to twitch in anticipation of trouble and senators to shift nervously in their seats. From time to time, I stole a look at Leontius and was unnerved to find him slouching languidly on his throne, idly passing comments to his aides and appearing thoroughly disinterested in the proceedings. As I resumed my seat at the end of my speech, the Praelector announced Eusebius, the head of the emperor's secret police. I felt a familiar spasm in my bowels.

He began, "We have just heard a litany of hysterical allegations by the *comes domi*, Justinian, also known as ..." - he paused for effect - "Rhinotmetus!". This last he spat out with such a venom that I visibly winced. There were sharp intakes of breath around the chamber, and then the Senate erupted. The tribunes rushed for the doors, eager to impart this latest development to the scandal hungry crowd outside. A strange sensation ran up my spine as the realisation of what was to follow sank in. Eusebius had obviously compiled a damning dossier on my rhinophobia, carefully waiting for the day on which to attack me with it. He sought to discredit my testimony by appealing to irrational bigotry. Now I knew why Leontius had looked so smug.

Incensed, I strode back towards the lectern with such passion that Eusebius involuntarily took a few paces backwards. I approached the lectern, and placed on it a medallion. "*Cave oppressorem.*" Then I purposefully turned it over. "*Caveat oppressor.*" With dignity, I methodically removed my nose. I stood erect and proud, noseless for the assembly to see. My gaze locked with that of Leontius and the memory of a schoolmaster long ago washed over my mind. In grave tones I addressed the Senate.

“I stand before you as a man who chooses to be without a nose, and I condemn this usurper who sits upon the throne of Constantine and savages your citizens.”

My eye caught the movement of the Captain of the Senatorial Guard as he mounted the rostrum to command his troops.

History pivots on an epoch.

“*Alea iacta est!*”, I muttered to myself.

*

The midday sun baked the dig site, as Professor Norwich sat at a table in the main tent. He looked out over the rocky plains and contemplated the flourishing - dazzling, legend has it - city that once stood here. The capital of an empire which had dominated the world millennia ago, and now was hardly even known of outside the historical institutes.

It had been a remarkable season here at the dig. Many scholars had even doubted the existence of this fabled city - here he was unearthing its mysteries. He idly picked up one of the coins that had been discovered that morning. A proud and confident countenance, yet oddly strange, was embossed on the metal disc. Around the rim was the phrase

“BASILEUS JUSTINIAN II RHINOTMETUS”.